

IIT KANPUR DIARIES

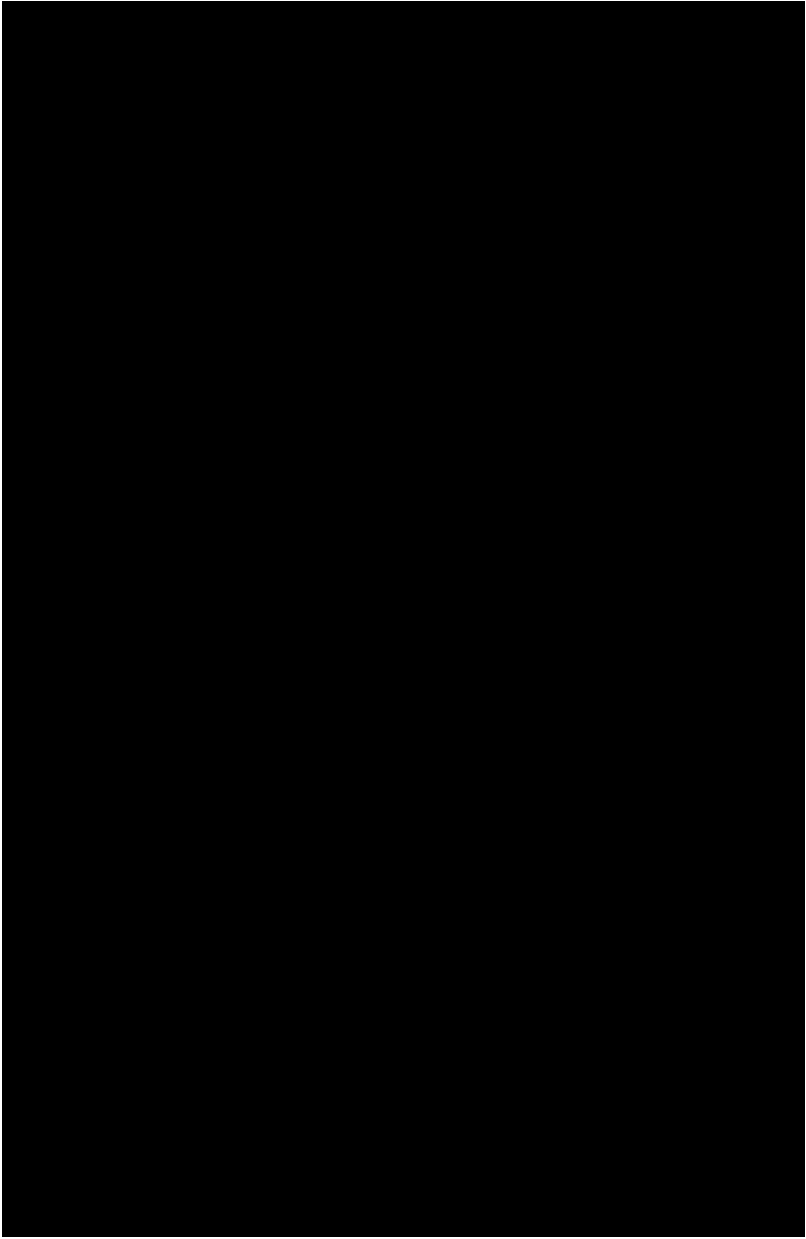
GEARS, CODES, &
HEARTBEATS

RISHI 'FLOW' DESAI



IIT KANPUR

DIARIES



HEARTBEATS

RISHI 'FLOW' DESAI



The morning detour

1

I hopped off my rickety bicycle in front of MT Canteen, the sun already beating down on IIT Kanpur's sprawling campus. A couple of crows squawked overhead, and a trio of second-years sat on a nearby bench, half-asleep, muttering curses about last night's all-nighter.

"Arre, Arjun! Over here!"

My friend Kris—full name Krishna Gupta—was shouting from the canteen counter, waving his arms like a maniac. "Saale, you take ages, yaar. Hurry up!"

I rolled my eyes, parking my cycle next to the neem tree. "Chill, bhai. My chain jammed near Hall 5. Almost fell on my ass."

Kris snickered, leaning in to whisper as I reached him. "You'd love that, wouldn't you? Getting down and dirty—"

"Shut up, chutiya," I muttered, whacking him lightly on the shoulder. "You promised not to be a pervert before 9 a.m."

He broke into a wide grin. "Sorry, sorry. So what's the plan? Chai-samosa now, workshop soon?"

“Yeah, otherwise we’ll die of starvation,” I said, nodding at the canteen guy for chai and chola samosa. “We’ve got that special morning session for our robotic arm idea. Batra sir’s expecting results next week.”

Kris did a mock salute. “Aye, Captain. By the way, you’re all pumped about this workshop thing—any chance it’s because Dr. Chatterjee might show up?”

I scowled, feeling warmth creep up my neck. “Bhenchod, not you too. I just want to get the project right.”

He shot me a knowing smirk. “Right, right. Just don’t blow a fuse when she calls your name, Romeo.”

Bellies full and minds half-wired on chai, we hopped on our cycles and pedaled toward the Mechanical Workshop. It was barely 8:30 a.m., and the campus roads were still relatively empty—aside from a few senior couples strolling hand-in-hand, trying to dodge the campus gossip mill. “Workshops usually happen at 2–5, na?” Kris grumbled as we approached the massive grey building. “Saala, we’re giving up precious snooze time just to show off to Batra sir.”

I shook my head, trying to stifle a laugh. “We pitched the fluid-cooled robotic arm, remember? If we don’t prove ourselves, he’ll make us the official ‘taali maar monkeys’ of the batch.”

“Taali maar monkeys?” Kris said, snorting. “We’d be the ones

applauding when actual brains get the credit for projects we thought of first.”

We parked our cycles at the workshop gates. A few peacocks strutted around—standard IIT Kanpur wildlife cameo. Inside, we found the workshop largely deserted, save for a couple of third-years disassembling something that looked suspiciously like a toaster-turned-mini-furnace. One of them glanced up and gave a half-hearted greeting.

“Yo, Arjun, Kris—early risers, huh? Did Batra sir put a gun to your head or something?”

“Might as well have,” Kris tossed back. “We’re trying to finalize our robotic arm design before the official labs begin. You guys?”

“Fucked if we know,” the other guy grunted, holding up a charred piece of metal. “We’re messing with homemade casting. Let’s see if we pass this time.”

Kris and I grabbed a corner workstation. On the table lay a half-assembled array of aluminum rods, leftover bearings, and a clunky servo motor we’d scrounged from the Mechatronics storeroom. The plan: create a prototype robotic arm with integrated fluid channels for cooling and lubrication. I was handling the mechanical design and gear ratios, while Kris coded the Python script to manage temperature sensors.

“Arjun, if we run fluid at too high a velocity, the arm joints might leak,” Kris cautioned, opening his battered notebook. “We need those damn O-rings to hold up.”

“You worry too much,” I replied, examining a gear assembly. “Focus on your code. If your sensor logic fails, the fluid might overheat and warp the servo.”

“Bhai, main code likh lunga,” Kris said confidently.

“Just remember, I can’t fix your crappy gear alignment with a few lines of Python.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Crappy gear alignment? I’ll show you crappy ___”

Before I could finish, Dr. Meera Chatterjee stepped in. She wore a simple salwar suit, but her presence demanded attention. She looked at our workstation, then at me, and offered a slight smile. “Good morning, boys. I see the mechanical dream team’s at it early.”

Kris, the opportunist, elbowed me gently. “Good morning, ma’am! We’re just trying to finalize our swirl-flow concept. Arjun here is pretty good at swirl—”

“Kris, saale,” I hissed, kicking him under the table. “Yes, ma’am,” I said more politely, “we’re testing fluid channels along the arm’s length, hoping to keep servo temps within safe limits.”

Dr. Chatterjee nodded, her gaze lingering on me for a moment. “Sounds promising. If you need any references on boundary-layer theory or real-time flow measurement, let me know. Also, we’ll be discussing advanced Fluid Mechanics applications next week—drop

by my office if you want a head start.”

“Sure, ma’am,” I managed, trying to sound calm despite the flutter in my gut.

As she walked away, Kris burst into a grin. “Dekh raha hai? She’s obviously into—”

“Just shut it,” I snapped, cheeks warming. “She’s a professor, man. Don’t start.”

“Alright, alright,” he said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “But don’t blame me if your swirl flows in the wrong direction, haan?”

I shot him a glare, then busied myself with measuring the servo’s mounting holes. The faint hum of the workshop machines was oddly soothing—a reminder that while the world might revolve around borderline sex jokes and questionable crushes, we still had real, technical stuff to do.

An hour ticked by in design sketches and rude banter. When Kris’s watch beeped at 10:00 a.m., my stomach flipped, remembering the Thermodynamics II quiz at 2 pm.

“Okay, we’ve got about four hours to wrap up, eat, and revise exergy analysis before Batra sir roasts us alive,” I said, packing up the gears.

“Exactly. Let’s bounce,” Kris agreed, “before we get chucked out for missing official lab hours.”

Outside, the midday sun bore down harshly. Students shuffled past—some looking half-dead from back-to-back assignments, others gossiping about who was hooking up with whom in which hostel. Kris and I cycled slowly, weaving around a group of giggling first-years who shot us curious glances, probably wondering why we were covered in machine oil before noon.

“Dude,” Kris began, “I’m telling you, we’re onto something big with this project. If we can finalize that fluid-cooling system, we might even showcase at Techkriti. Bhenchod, we might become campus celebs.”

I laughed, flicking sweat from my forehead. “You dream big, bhai. But let’s first pass Thermo.”

“Arre, Thermo toh pass ho hi jayega,” Kris quipped.

“I’m more worried about not passing on the chance with Dr. Chatterjee, if you know what I mean.”

“Chutiya,” I muttered, though I couldn’t entirely ignore the weird little thrill in my chest. “Let’s just get a 10 in that quiz, shall we?”

We sped up, heading toward the Library for a quick revision session. The campus was a tableau of dusty roads, swaying trees,

and random animals living in quiet harmony with the perpetually over-cafeinated student body. In the distance, I saw a trio of seniors discussing the merits of forging vs. casting for Manufacturing Processes. One of them yelled, “Saala, forging each other’s attendance is the only forging we do properly!”

Kris and I burst out laughing, nearly losing our balance. “That’s BTech life for you,” he said between chuckles. “Full of forging, forging, and more forging—in every sense.”

“Well, no forging the quiz,” I reminded him. “You either know the second law of Thermodynamics or you don’t.”

“True,” Kris smirked. “But maybe if Dr. Chatterjee’s proctoring, you can conjure up some swirl flows to distract her.”

“Screw you, man,” I sputtered, though I couldn’t help grinning. “Race you there?”

And with that, we pedaled hard, leaving behind the workshop, the canteen, and all the gossip swirling in the hot Kanpur air—our day only half-begun, with a hundred more laughs, curses, and technical tangles yet to unravel.

The Thermodynamics II quiz was set for two in the afternoon at the Lecture Hall Complex, Room 204. By the time Kris and I stumbled in—fresh from an MT canteen lunch—my brain felt jumbled with exergy formulas, random swirl-cooling ideas, and a faint hangover of morning workshop excitement. Outside the hall, students clustered in tense little groups, everyone clinging to scribbled notes about entropy generation and heat-transfer coefficients.

Kris gave me a worried look. “Bhai, if Batra sir decided to go tricky on us, I’m done for. I barely remember the difference between the Brayton and Rankine cycles.”

I tried a reassuring smile, even though my pulse was throbbing in my temples. “You’ll survive. Just remember to write neat. Sometimes that helps, I swear.”

We filed into the room alongside our classmates, the AC doing nothing to cool down the collective anxiety. Professor Batra hovered at the front, eagle-eyed and silent, his presence enough to clamp a vice around my nerves. After a terse greeting, he handed out the quiz sheets. I scanned the questions: entropy calculations, a short exergy problem on the Carnot cycle, and one question on real irreversible processes. Standard stuff, but still enough to make me break into a nervous sweat.

About thirty minutes later, Batra’s voice cut through the quiet. “Time’s up. Pens down.” We exchanged relief-laden glances as we filed back into the corridor. The usual post-exam chatter broke out—some lamenting sign conventions, others guessing partial credit. Kris and I just shrugged at each other, unsure whether we’d aced it or bombed half our formulas.

“Chalo,” he said, yawning. “Let’s get out of this death trap. My head

needs fresh air.”

We ambled outside to the LHC lawns, where groups of students lounged on the grass, some strumming guitars, others ranting about upcoming mid-terms. The sun beat down, hot and unyielding, but the breeze felt like a small blessing. I was contemplating whether we should go straight to the library when Dr. Meera Chatterjee emerged from the faculty block, a folder clutched under her arm.

She gave us a friendly nod. “How was the quiz, boys?”

Kris forced a laugh. “Ma’am, it was... educational. Let’s leave it at that.”

Dr. Chatterjee smiled. “Well, third-year Thermo can be tough, but if you’ve been revising, you should be fine. I hope this quiz hasn’t derailed your plans for the robotic arm. If anything, you should strike while the iron’s hot.”

She pulled out a couple of folded printouts from her folder, then handed them to me. “Here are some papers on fluid-coupling techniques. Could help with your swirl-cooling concept. Drop by my office if you want to discuss the boundary-layer approach further.”

My heart gave a little jolt of excitement. “Thank you, ma’am. We’ll definitely check them out.”

As she walked off, Kris raised an eyebrow at me. “Told you she’s way too invested in your swirl flows, man.”

I brushed him off, cheeks warming. “Dude, she’s just being helpful. We do have a cool idea, remember?”

He shook his head, a mischievous grin plastered on his face. “Cool idea, and a professor who’s awfully encouraging. Don’t say I never told you.”

I tried changing the subject by dialing home on my phone, realizing I hadn’t spoken to my parents in days. My mom picked up on the second ring, and the moment she said “Hello, beta,” I felt a knot in my chest ease. She sounded glad to hear from me, asking how classes were going and whether I was eating well. I promised to

take care of myself, which was only partly true—I was usually surviving on chai, samosas, and late-night instant noodles. Still, talking to her made me feel grounded.

When I hung up, Kris patted me on the back. “Feeling better? Ghar ka yaad aa raha hai?”

“Just a bit,” I admitted. “Everything’s moving so fast: Thermo quizzes, lab reports, this robotics thing, Chatterjee ma’am’s references. Sometimes I just want to crawl into bed.”

He laughed, motioning toward the library. “Maybe after you read those fluid-coupling papers. Gotta keep the momentum going, right?”

We headed to the Central Library, skirting past groups of first-years chattering about their upcoming Techkriti ideas. The library’s air conditioning greeted us like a soothing balm, and the faint smell of old books mingled with the hum of the computer lab. We found a table in a quieter corner and spread out the printouts Dr. Chatterjee had given me. While Kris flipped through them, I browsed the library’s catalog for advanced fluid-mechanics texts.

The content was dense—discussions on boundary-layer stability, forced convection in mechanical joints, sensor integration for real-time feedback. Still, something about it got my adrenaline pumping. It felt like we were on the cusp of bridging textbook knowledge with a tangible, ambitious project. Kris jotted notes in his battered notebook, occasionally showing me a diagram of flow channels or servo heat dissipation.

By the time we emerged from the library, the sun was already sliding down the horizon. Lights across campus flicked on, and students spilled out from various club meetings and labs, the evening air filled with faint laughter and energetic debates. I felt oddly at peace, even though a million deadlines loomed. There was something exhilarating about juggling all these demands and still finding the spark for a project that could, in its own small way, push boundaries.

“Should we see Chatterjee ma’am now?” Kris asked, glancing at his

phone. “It’s almost six. Could be a good time, unless you’re too zonked.”

I hesitated. “Maybe tomorrow morning. My brain’s half-dead, and I think I need to just chill for a bit. Grab dinner, maybe watch something mindless.”

Kris nodded. “Sounds good. Anyway, I want to try messing around with some code tonight. I’ve got this idea for a Python script that’ll read real-time temperature data from the sensor array. If it works, we’ll be able to adjust servo current on the fly.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely your territory,” I said, a small smile tugging at my lips. “I’m the grease monkey who’ll refine the mechanical layout. We’ll blow Batra sir away, one swirl-flow at a time.”

We pedaled back to the hostels, the sky a deepening orange. Streetlights illuminated the familiar paths where peacocks sometimes roamed and random couples sneaked off to find quiet corners. It was the kind of evening where everything felt vivid, full of possibility. Even the dingy old buildings had a certain charm under the glow of the lights.

“Any last words of wisdom, oh great mech coder?” I teased Kris as we split ways near Hall 5.

He feigned a serious expression. “Yes. Don’t let the swirl flows distract you from real flows. If you know what I mean.”

I groaned, but couldn’t help a tired grin. “Shut up, man. Goodnight.”

Inside my room, I tossed my bag on the chair and flopped onto the bed. My phone buzzed with a new message—just a friend sharing a meme about Thermo burnout. Still, I found myself thinking about Dr. Chatterjee’s knowing smile and the fervor in her voice when she talked technical. Was Kris right about her interest, or was she simply nurturing a potentially brilliant student project?

Whatever the truth, I realized I didn’t mind the attention, not when it came with the promise of innovation and a chance to do

something that felt bigger than just another routine assignment. Sleep tugged at my eyes, and I let it take me, drifting off to images of swirling fluid channels, lines of code, and a professor's intriguing smile—all folded into the ever-pulsing heartbeat of IIT Kanpur.

Sparks in the Lab

3

The morning sun was already glaring down by the time I reached the Mechanical Workshop. My phone buzzed incessantly—Kris had sent half a dozen frantic texts about some “big test” he’d planned for our robotic arm prototype. We’d booked an early slot in the open-lab hours, hoping to avoid the usual 2–5 pm rush of undergrads swarming every lathe and milling machine.

I found him hunched over our half-assembled contraption in a cramped corner, rummaging through wires and servo units. His hair was a mess, eyes bloodshot, like he hadn’t slept a wink.

“Bhai, you look like a zombie,” I said, dropping my backpack with a thunk. “What’s the emergency?”

He waved a hand impatiently. “Arjun, I had a breakthrough last night. I coded an adaptive control loop for the fluid temperature. If the servo overheats, the program automatically adjusts the flow rate—like we discussed.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s great, but did you see the time? We have a mid-sem for Fluid Mechanics tomorrow, and—”

Kris shoved a Tupperware container into my hands. “I got us parathas from Hall 4 mess. Eat, code, and let’s make history, bro.”

“Shit, fine,” I sighed. The parathas smelled vaguely of burnt dough, but I was too hungry to complain. “Tell me what you need me to do.”

He pointed to a coil of flexible tubing. “Hook these up to the servo brackets. Then we’ll fill the reservoir with water and test the swirl-cooling. If it doesn’t leak, we’re golden.”

“Got it.” I gulped down a quick bite of paratha, then set to work fastening the tubes in place. The workshop was alive with typical morning activity—some seniors working on a BAJA buggy, a couple of second-years complaining about a Graphics Lab submission, and overhead, an ancient ceiling fan spinning lazily. Sweat trickled down my forehead as I wrestled with the tube connectors.

Suddenly, Kris’s laptop beeped—a shrill, excited sort of beep, not the usual error tone. He shot up, eyes gleaming. “Dude, the code compiled perfectly. Let’s do a quick run.”

We rigged the servo motor to the bracket, attached the fluid lines, and switched on the power. For a moment, the mechanical arm jerked to life. Then a hiss cut through the air, followed by a thin jet of water spraying right at Kris’s face.

“Arre, mother—!” He jumped back, drenched from head to toe.

I nearly dropped my pliers laughing. “You wanted a real test. Consider yourself thoroughly tested.”

He wiped his face, sputtering curses. I quickly killed the power, water dripping off the servo mount. Our swirl-cooling system had turned into a swirl fountain.

“Chutiya code!” Kris fumed, inspecting the tubes. “No, wait, maybe it’s a hardware issue?”

I grimaced at the clamp. “Might be a loose connector. Let me tighten it.”

Midway through re-securing the tubing, I heard a familiar click of heels on the workshop’s cement floor. I glanced up to see Dr. Meera Chatterjee approaching, carrying a folder of what looked like lab reports. She paused, frowning at the puddle forming around Kris’s feet.

“Everything alright here, gentlemen?”

Kris attempted a smile, water dripping from his chin. “Uh, just a minor leakage, ma’am. Early-stage prototype. Very early stage.”

Her eyes flicked to me, then the fluid-soaked cables. “Minor? Looks like you’re testing the campus irrigation system,” she quipped. Then her expression softened. “But I’m impressed you two are actually trying real-time fluid control at this stage. Careful with electronics, though—you don’t want a short circuit.”

I felt a sudden nervous energy spark between us. I couldn’t forget the way Dr. Chatterjee’s eyes had lingered on me before, nor the rumors Kris kept fanning about her “special interest.” She leaned closer to inspect the servo, and I caught a faint whiff of her jasmine perfume over the musty workshop smell.

“Your swirl flow concept is sound,” she continued. “You just need to ensure the fluid pressure doesn’t spike. Did you measure the initial inlet pressure?”

Kris opened his mouth, then closed it. “I, uh, forgot to calibrate the pump speed after last night’s code changes.”

She gave a slight nod, lips curving in a half-smile. “There’s a reason we do incremental testing. Don’t jump straight to full flow. Keep me posted on your progress; I’d like to see it run successfully.”

With that, she left us to our mess, her dupatta brushing the dusty floor. Kris shot me a smug grin the moment she was out of earshot.

“Dekh raha hai? She’s definitely coming around more often. I swear, if she’s not into you, I’ll do a semester of unpaid lab demos.”

I tried to maintain a neutral face, but my cheeks heated. “Shut up, dude. She’s just doing her job.”

He wagged a soggy sleeve at me. “Yeah, sure. ‘Just doing her job’ by personally checking on a third-year project that’s not even on official departmental rosters yet.”

“Uff,” I groaned. “Can we focus on the leak, please?”

Kris let it drop—thankfully—and we got back to reattaching the hoses. As we worked, the entire workshop rattled with the usual banter: someone cursing a broken CNC bit, another guy humming a Bollywood tune while grinding metal. Two junior girls from Aero

walked by, giggling at Kris's waterlogged T-shirt. He gave them a mock salute, still annoyed at being drenched, but never one to miss a chance to play it cool.

An hour later, we finally achieved a stable test run. The servo turned smoothly, the fluid circulated without spraying everything in sight, and Kris's Python script displayed real-time temperature readouts on his laptop. My chest puffed with pride—it was a rough mock-up, but a promising one.

Just then, a whoop of excitement rang from the far side of the workshop, followed by a heavy clang. We glanced over to see a student from the BAJA team had dropped part of his car chassis on the floor. The clang echoed, followed by a string of Hindi curses, as everyone craned to see if he'd lost a toe or something.

"Watch it, yaar!" the workshop instructor barked, hustling over to the chaos. Typical day in the Mech workshop: one part progress, two parts near-accidents.

I packed up the servo mount and signaled Kris to shut down the power. "Let's get out of here before we run out of luck. We can refine the code in the library."

He nodded, rifling through his bag for a spare T-shirt. "Good idea. I need to dry off anyway. And maybe we can corner Dr. Chatterjee with actual data next time."

My heart twinged at the mention of her name. I stashed the gear assembly in a labeled box, half-anticipating a sudden cameo from Professor Batra to deliver a scolding about "fanciful side projects." But he was nowhere in sight. If I had to guess, he was probably terrorizing some poor souls in the Thermo lab.

We headed out, stepping into the midday sun. The campus felt alive—peacocks shrieking in the distance, an ice-cream vendor peddling near the academic block, couples hiding behind banyan trees. Kris joked about needing to sell "I Survived a Mech Lab Flood" T-shirts to pay for new servo parts. I snorted, mentally revisiting how Dr. Chatterjee's eyes had sparkled with curiosity—and something else—when she inspected our setup.

We hopped on our cycles, my mind zipping between the project's next steps, the possibility of a meltdown if Batra sir found out about the morning fiasco, and a flicker of excitement that Dr. Chatterjee actually believed in our idea. Kris was yammering about how we should aim for a demonstration at Techkriti, maybe attract sponsors, maybe even pitch to a real robotics firm.

"Dude, slow down," I said, as we wove through the crowd outside the library. "We just fixed a leak. We're miles away from a final product."

He shrugged. "You never know how far you can go until you dream big, Arjun. Who knows? We might end up with a killer project and a killer letter of recommendation. From the professor you keep pretending you don't have a crush on."

I tried to respond with a sarcastic remark, but all that came out was a halfhearted chuckle. Truthfully, I wasn't sure how I felt about Dr. Chatterjee's attention. Admiration? A sense of being on the brink of something meaningful? Or just typical BTech fantasies run wild?

Those questions buzzed around my head as we parked our cycles near the library steps. Just then, my phone lit up with a WhatsApp notification—mom's reminder to get a health check-up. Typical. Another flicker of guilt for ignoring real-life responsibilities in favor of coding and swirl flows.

Kris headed inside, scanning for a free table. I stood at the entrance a moment longer, letting the library's cold air wash over me. The last few hours had given me an electrifying taste of what we could achieve—a half-wet fiasco, yes, but also a step closer to a genuine mechanical innovation. And I couldn't deny it: in the midst of the chaos, Dr. Chatterjee's subtle encouragement made everything a bit more... intense.

"Arjun, stop daydreaming!" Kris hollered from inside, drawing amused looks from a cluster of first-years. "We've got fluid equations to solve!"

I rolled my eyes, hoisted my bag, and strode in after him. This was just the beginning—of potential breakthroughs, near-disasters, and

a swirl of emotions I wasn't ready to name. But if the morning's events were any sign, the rest of the semester was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

Office confessions

4

A hot wind rustled the campus trees as I hurried toward Dr. Meera Chatterjee's office on the second floor of the Western Lab Complex. My mind buzzed with everything that had happened over the past few weeks—the swirl-cooling system fiasco, Kris's half-teasing remarks about me and Dr. Chatterjee, and, most recently, a whispered rumor that she and Professor Batra had parted ways after a rocky, off-the-record relationship. Frankly, the idea that a professor and the Head of Mechanical had been involved at all was gossip enough. Now, as I climbed the staircase, I couldn't shake the fact that Kris had texted me: "Heard she's single, buddy. Don't do anything stupid."

My heart pounded harder than usual, each step echoing in the nearly empty corridor. The lab complex was quiet except for the distant hum of AC units. Her door—marked with a printed nameplate, Dr. Meera Chatterjee—was ajar. I hesitated, remembering how my pulse had raced every time she stood near me in the workshop. Then I took a breath and knocked softly.

"Come in," she called. Her voice was calm but carried that same gentle warmth I'd grown to... well, admire.

I found her seated behind a wooden desk piled with research papers and a half-drunk cup of chai. Slivers of late-afternoon sunlight slanted through the blinds, illuminating dust motes in the air. She glanced up, then offered a small, tired smile. "Arjun, you made it."

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. "You asked me to drop by, ma'am? Something about fluid-flow calculations for the joint design?"

She set aside her reading glasses and nodded. "Yes, but —" her eyes

flickered with hesitation. “We can discuss those later. First, I wanted to... I suppose I wanted to talk about a few things, off the record.”

I sat down on the edge of a chair across from her desk, uncertain. It was unusual for Dr. Chatterjee to look this conflicted. Usually, she was poised—every syllable measured, every glance focused. Now, I sensed an undercurrent of tension, as though she was weighing whether to speak freely or keep something bottled up.

“Arjun, I’m aware of some talk going around,” she began, folding her hands. “About me and Professor Batra.” She paused, inhaling sharply. “We were involved—briefly. It ended badly. And I realize how it might look to have rumors swirling while I’m also... well, collaborating with you on the robotics project.”

My throat constricted. “I—um—”

She raised a hand, stopping me. “Let me finish. I’m sorry if this complicates things for you. But I couldn’t let it remain an elephant in the room. I’ve seen how you look at me sometimes. And if I’m honest...” She exhaled, her gaze meeting mine. “I’m not indifferent either.”

A hush stretched between us. My heart hammered. Was she really saying this? Every rational part of my brain screamed about the lines we’d be crossing, the ethical implications, the potential fallout. But I also couldn’t deny the flush of excitement that surged inside me whenever she said my name.

Tentatively, I murmured, “I don’t want to cause any trouble, ma’am. I—”

“Meera,” she corrected softly. “When it’s just us, you can call me Meera.”

I swallowed. Something in her expression—equal parts vulnerability and confidence—made my stomach flip. “Meera,” I repeated, feeling the syllables as though they were forbidden. “I—this is all new to me.”

She stood from her chair, moving around the desk. As she came closer, I caught the faint scent of jasmine she always wore, the same one that lingered in the workshop whenever she stopped by. She leaned against the desk in front of me, arms crossed—not defensively, but in a way that softened the professional distance.

“I know,” she said, voice quieter now. “We’re both adults, but I’m your professor. This is... complicated, to say the least.”

I pushed myself to stand, caught between caution and a surge of yearning. “I don’t want to jeopardize your career—”

She gave a mirthless chuckle. “Trust me, things with Batra have already stirred enough gossip. If the department found out about this, it wouldn’t be pretty.” Her eyes flicked to the door. Then she took a breath. “Yet, here we are.”

My pulse roared in my ears. I felt that magnetic pull, the same rush you get when you stand at the edge of a high dive, about to leap. “I—I don’t want to pretend, though,” I whispered.

She looked at me for a long moment, then slowly lifted a hand to cup my cheek. The warmth of her touch sent a tremor through me. “Neither do I. But if we do this, it stays between us.”

I nodded, unable to form words. In that moment, it felt like the entire world narrowed to her hand on my face, the gentle curve of her lips, the soft planes of her body so close to mine. With an unspoken understanding, I placed my hand on her waist, feeling the gentle rise and fall of her breath.

She leaned in, her mouth brushing against mine in the faintest suggestion of a kiss. A wave of heat cascaded through my veins. It was surreal—this woman I’d spent weeks admiring from a distance, standing here, telling me she shared some part of that feeling. Carefully, I deepened the kiss, tasting the remnants of her chai, feeling her fingers slide up to my hair.

In the back of my mind, alarm bells rang—What if someone walks in? What if Batra finds out?—but they were drowned out by the rush of adrenaline and the insistent thump of my heart. She parted

her lips against mine, a low sound escaping her throat that made my entire body flush.

We broke apart briefly, breathing hard. Her eyes flicked toward the door again, then to the windows. “Let me lock this,” she murmured.

I swallowed, watching as she quietly turned the lock and drew the blinds. The hush in the office seemed to magnify every breath, every rustle of our clothes. She returned, and I reached for her, hands tentative at first but growing surer as she responded, encouraging me with soft murmurs.

My senses swam with the taste of her skin, the press of her body beneath her elegant kurta. It wasn’t frantic—more like a slow unraveling of tension we’d both denied. She guided my hands, letting me slip them under the light fabric, and I was lost in the soft warmth of her curves, the quiet gasps that punctuated our kisses.

Time blurred. One moment, we were standing by the desk; the next, she nudged me toward the chair, half-sitting on my lap as our mouths found each other again. I could feel her heartbeat racing in tandem with mine. Her nails grazed lightly down my arms, drawing shivers from me.

She leaned in, her breath hot against my ear. “Arjun, are you—?”

“Yes.” My voice trembled. “I’m sure.”

I’d never felt more certain or more aware of the consequences. For a heartbeat, I remembered the swirl-cooling project, Kris’s jokes, my parents’ phone calls— everything that defined life outside this moment. But the warmth of Meera’s body pressed close, her quiet exhalations against my neck, made it impossible to focus on anything else.

Clothes shifted, parted. Each brush of her lips along my neck fueled a dizzying mixture of excitement and awe. I explored her skin in return, savoring every subtle intake of breath, every soft hush she made when my hands roamed where she welcomed them. Despite the risk—her desk phone, the hallway footsteps—we let ourselves be carried away.

When we finally crossed that line, it was like stepping into a hidden world. Her voice caught in her throat, mine too, muffled by kisses that carried equal parts urgency and tenderness. The chair creaked beneath us, but we barely noticed. I cradled her body in my arms, marveling at how something so nerve-wracking could also feel so right. With each press of our bodies, we spiraled deeper into that heady, almost surreal haze of closeness.

I lost track of time, enveloped in the warmth and the hush of her office. At some point, the faint chime of the campus clock tower drifted through the window, pulling us back to the present. Meera stilled, her hair falling over her face in dark waves. She lifted her gaze to mine, lips parted in silent question.

I brushed a lock of hair from her cheek. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, inhaling shakily. "Yes. Just... give me a second."

Slowly, we separated, rearranging our clothes in a careful, almost apologetic silence. My heart still thundered, my skin tingling where her touch lingered. She glanced around the office, as if suddenly aware of the textbooks, the half-eaten breakfast on her desk, the entire environment that was never meant for something so intimate.

"This is—" She paused, searching my expression. "This can't be more than what it is right now, Arjun. I'm responsible for you, your grades... we have to be discreet."

I exhaled, a swirl of hope and fear churning in my chest. "I understand. I'm not expecting a public announcement." The thought alone made me flush with alarm—any hint of this reaching Batra sir or the rumor mill would be catastrophic. "I just... I don't regret it."

Her eyes filled with a mixture of relief and sadness. "Neither do I. But let's be careful. For both our sakes."

She glanced at her watch, lips pressing into a thin line. "You should go," she murmured. "People will be around soon. Lab times, office hours..."

My legs felt wobbly as I stood. She ran a hand through her hair,

tucking it behind her ear, trying to regain that poised faculty demeanor. I grabbed my backpack, every sense still buzzing with the memory of her touch. A million questions formed in my mind—What now? Was this just a one-time release of tension, or something more? But I couldn't bring myself to ask, not yet.

She walked me to the door, unlocking it quietly. Her gaze softened one last time, a silent, lingering goodbye that spoke louder than any words. I stepped into the hallway, the AC's hum jolting me back to reality.

"Take care," she whispered, before closing the door gently.

Stumbling down the corridor, I felt as if I'd been dropped into another dimension—an ordinary hallway humming with fluorescent lights, while behind me, something monumental had just shifted. My phone buzzed in my pocket: Kris, probably, or maybe the workshop alerts. But for once, I didn't rush to answer. My heart was too full, my mind reeling from what had just happened in Dr. Chatterjee's office.

Everything—our project, the rumors, the future— suddenly felt more complex than ever. And yet, a strange sense of euphoria lit up my every cell. We'd crossed a line that probably couldn't be uncrossed. For better or worse, something extraordinary had ignited between us.

A Secret Between Two Worlds

5

The corridor outside Dr. Chatterjee's office felt like a passage back to reality. I'd barely made it ten steps before my phone buzzed—twice, then thrice. Part of me wanted to ignore it, still trying to process the heady mix of emotions swirling in my chest. But the world of an IIT Kanpur BTech student waits for no one, so I sighed and checked my phone.

Kris had sent a string of messages:

“Oye, lab tests on swirl pump tomorrow @10???”

“We gotta fix the servo code. My simulation's glitching.”

“Arjun?? Hello? Did you pass out in the corridor?”

I mustered a shaky breath. A dozen thoughts jabbed at my consciousness: the warmth of Dr. Chatterjee's body moments ago, her whispered caution, the looming swirl-cooling test. Shoving my phone into my pocket, I forced my feet into motion. Every step away from that office was like waking from a dream—exhilarating, but tinged with worry.

Outside, the afternoon heat smacked me in the face. Kris was perched on a stone bench under a dying neem tree, tapping his sneakers against the dusty path. As soon as he spotted me, he stood up. “Bhai, you okay? You were in there for a while.”

I cleared my throat, fighting down the urge to blush. “We discussed some advanced boundary-layer stuff.”

Kris eyed me suspiciously. “Must've been real in-depth to leave you looking this dazed.” He paused, then cocked an eyebrow. “Dude,

you sure you're fine? You look like you just ran a marathon."

I avoided his gaze, hoping he wouldn't notice how unsteady I felt. "I'm good. Just—she gave me more references to read. Let's, um... let's head to the library."

Kris shrugged and grabbed his backpack, though his sideways glances told me he wasn't buying my casual act. "We can do that. But we also need to talk about the pump. If we can't stabilize the fluid velocity, we'll flood the entire workshop again."

"Right," I muttered, happy to latch onto the technical angle. Anything to steer the conversation away from my heart pounding like a piston gone rogue.

We set off across campus, me trying to walk normally when my nerves were still humming from what had just happened in Dr. Chatterjee's office. The air smelled of dust, diesel, and the occasional burst of flowers from a creeper vine clinging to the older buildings. A few seniors ambled by, gossiping about their placement interviews. Somewhere behind us, a group of second-years was arguing about the best place for chai.

Kris finally broke the silence with a conspiratorial grin. "You can't fool me, you know. You look all... I don't know, flushed. Something definitely went down in that office, beyond the usual fluid-dynamics talk."

I nearly tripped on a loose brick. "What are you, Sherlock? We went over swirl-cooling equations, that's all."

He laughed softly, pressing me for more. "I'm your best friend, yaar. You really think I won't catch on?" Then, seeing my expression, he softened his tone. "Look, if something's happening, just be careful. Batra sir's already in a mood these days."

I swallowed the tightness in my throat. Memories of Dr. Chatterjee's warm touch set a lightning bolt of emotion through me. "Yeah," I said quietly. "I will."

Kris let it drop, a rare show of empathy. "Fine. Let's focus on

surviving tomorrow's swirl-pump test. I have a sneaking suspicion Batra sir will 'casually' show up to see if we blow up the lab a second time."

The mention of Batra sir made my stomach twist, thinking about his recent breakup with Dr. Chatterjee. If he suspected anything between us... I shuddered at the fallout. "We'll make sure everything's locked down," I said, forcing a half-smile. "No leaks. No fiascos."

"Ha, famous last words," Kris joked.

We reached the library's glass doors, the AC inside beckoning like a promise of sanctuary. My mind churned with dread and excitement, the secret threatening to overheat my thoughts faster than any servo motor. Kris and I found a corner table, slinging our bags onto the worn chairs. He flipped open his notebook, lines of Python code scrawled in the margins next to swirl-flow sketches. I pretended to read a reference Dr. Chatterjee had given me, but I barely saw the words.

Every so often, Kris would nudge me with a question about fluid velocities or servo torque. I'd mumble a reply, forcing my brain to switch gears. The evening wore on, and we hammered out a plan to recalibrate the pump's maximum pressure. On the surface, it was just another day—two third-year Mechies, hunched over code and mechanical diagrams. But beneath that veneer, my pulse was caught in an undertow of longing and fear.

At one point, Kris looked at me sideways. "Dude, I swear you haven't blinked in the last five minutes. Are you sure you're not short-circuiting?"

I blinked furiously to prove him wrong. "I'm fine, man. Maybe just hungry."

He gave a short laugh. "Then let's crash the canteen. If we survive on samosas and caffeine now, maybe we'll still be alive to test the arm tomorrow."

We packed up and headed out, stepping into the warm twilight. The

campus lights flickered on, illuminating the dusty roads. A batch of boisterous freshers walked by, excited about an upcoming sports event. Kris led the way to MT canteen, but I trailed behind, glancing at my phone— no new messages. I tried not to hope for one from her, knowing full well how complicated everything had just become.

There in the canteen, over cups of steaming chai and plates of chola samosa, Kris rattled on about the code improvements. I half-listened, nodding at the right intervals. But every time I closed my eyes, I felt again the press of Dr. Chatterjee's lips, the hush of her voice, the thrill of crossing a line we couldn't un-cross. My chest tightened with the secret that sat between two worlds: one where I was just another BTech student, bantering about servo motors, and another where I'd discovered a forbidden intimacy with a professor caught in her own tangled history.

By the time we headed back to our hostels, the campus had grown quiet. I parted ways with Kris near Hall 5, mumbling something about needing to finish a lab report. In truth, I just needed to be alone. My room felt stifling at first, so I opened the window and let in the night air. The distant hum of peacocks and a few late-night cyclists drifting past provided a familiar lull.

Slumping onto my bed, I stared at the blinking lights of my charger. My phone sat silent, refusing to offer any comfort or clarity. Tomorrow, Kris and I would face another mechanical test of swirl flows and servo control. But the real test, I knew, was how I'd handle everything roiling inside me—and how long I could keep a secret that was already burning hotter than any gear friction I'd ever known.

The tipping point

6

Morning arrived like a reluctant sigh. I hardly slept, replaying every second of my time in Dr. Chatterjee's office. My mind churned with fear, excitement, and a gnawing sense of guilt—what if Professor Batra got wind of any of this? What if Kris suspected more than he already did? By the time I dragged myself to the workshop, my nerves were raw. I stared at the scuffed tiles, tried to breathe slowly, and reminded myself there was a full day's worth of engineering to tackle.

Kris was already there, kneeling by our robotic arm setup. Tools, cables, and an open laptop cluttered the workstation as if a small storm had ripped through. He looked up with a worried grin. "You look like you just saw a ghost. You okay?"

"I'm... I'll manage," I said. "What's the status?"

He gestured to a half-assembled pump rig. "We're about to test the swirl-cooling system again, but I tweaked the flow rate equations in the Python script. We should talk about the Reynolds number we're hitting. If it's too low, we won't get the cooling effect in the servo joints. Too high, and we risk overshoot, possibly another flood."

I crouched beside him, trying to focus on the mechanics rather than my personal chaos. "So how do we decide the sweet spot? We want some turbulence for heat transfer but not enough to blow out the seals."

"I ran some simulations using standard correlations." He pointed to a page of scribbled notes. "We need a Reynolds number around, say, two or three thousand for decent forced convection. That means adjusting the inlet velocity. If we see negative or oscillating readings, we'll kill the pump feed."

We arranged the piping carefully, double-checked the O-rings, and loaded Kris's new code. I glanced at the corridor, half expecting Dr. Chatterjee—or worse, Batra sir—to appear. My heart thudded. Since last night, I'd been torn between wanting desperately to see her and dreading the idea we might slip up in front of everyone.

Kris tapped his keyboard. "Let's do a dry run first." A humming noise kicked in as the servo motor tested its pivot, rotating a few degrees back and forth. Then came a gentle gurgle of water flowing through the tubes. My pulse quickened. One miscalculation and we'd be mopping the workshop floor again.

To my relief, the flow looked stable. The fluid piping vibrated slightly but didn't spray water in every direction. Kris whooped, fist-bumping the air. "Finally, we get a working test!"

A smattering of applause from the other side of the workshop startled me. The BAJA team, who'd watched our previous fiascos, clapped good-naturedly. One of them gave a thumbs-up. Kris bowed theatrically, joking, "Thank you, thank you. We'll be here all semester." I managed a smile, but a fresh pang of worry knotted my stomach. Where was Dr. Chatterjee in all this?

Just then, Batra sir stalked in, his polished shoes clicking on the cement floor. The workshop seemed to hold its collective breath. He walked up to our station, arms crossed behind his back. "So," he said, voice low, "this is the swirl-cooling contraption I've been hearing about?"

Kris cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. We, uh, made some improvements." He launched into a short explanation of velocity profiles, referencing boundary-layer equations. Batra listened, his face impassive as granite. Then he turned to me, eyes narrowed.

"And your role, Arjun?"

My mouth felt dry. "I handled the mechanical design—the gear ratios, servo attachments, and tubing layout. Kris took care of the coding."

Batra nodded curtly, peering at the servo mount. "Does Dr.

Chatterjee know you've progressed this far?"

I swallowed, my pulse skipping. "She... yes, sir. She's been giving us references for advanced fluid-flow integration."

His jaw tightened. For a moment, I felt sure he would say something about her, about them—like a silent jab that we both knew more than we were letting on. But he simply exhaled. "I see. You'd better deliver results. The department invests in promising work, not half-baked stunts."

He pivoted on his heel and strode off to inspect another group's project. Kris shot me a questioning look, brow furrowed. "That was... tense. You good?"

I forced a nod, my heart pounding. "I'm fine. Let's finalize the data logs before we lose power or something."

On the outside, it might have seemed like I was just rattled by Batra's usual intimidation. Inside, though, I was grappling with a roiling undercurrent of worry. How much did Batra suspect about me and Dr. Chatterjee? Had she told him about the breakup, or had word spread among the faculty? I hated the secrecy—yet I also knew the alternative was a disaster.

We completed a short test run, logging temperature readings and servo torque data. The swirl-cooling system worked better than expected, dropping the servo temperature by a few degrees under moderate load. Kris patted my shoulder, his grin genuine. "Not bad at all, dude. We might actually have something worth presenting at Techkriti."

My throat tightened at the mention of Techkriti. Public demos, big crowds, and, no doubt, heavy faculty presence. If all eyes were on us—and Dr. Chatterjee was the liaison—how long could we keep our secret under wraps? The conflicting surge of guilt, longing, and excitement churned in my gut. I felt like I was balancing on a knife's edge.

Kris must've noticed. He set his wrench aside. "Arjun, you've been on edge all day. You sure it's just Batra sir spooking you?"

I inhaled slowly, then decided to at least acknowledge a fraction of the truth. “I... talked to Dr. Chatterjee. She’s under a lot of stress too. Batra sir’s been giving her a hard time about departmental stuff. It’s messing with her.”

Kris nodded, concern softening his features. “That’s rough. She’s always been supportive of student projects. Hate to see politics screw that up.”

I exhaled, relieved he didn’t press further. We shut down the system, carefully draining the fluid so we wouldn’t risk another leak. As the last drips trickled into a metal bucket, I glanced around the workshop—people bustling about, the air thick with grease and ambition. My chest felt hollow. I wanted to do more than just build a decent robotic arm. I wanted to protect what had bloomed between Dr. Chatterjee and me, insane as it was.

“Let’s run the data analysis,” Kris said, powering up his laptop. “I want to see the actual heat transfer coefficient. If it’s high enough, we can reduce the fluid flow and save on pump power.”

“Sure,” I said, leaning over to read the code. For a few minutes, I lost myself in the swirl of numbers: Reynolds, Nusselt, dimensionless correlations that told a story about how fluid whisked away heat. The clarity of engineering was almost comforting, a language of logic and math that steadied me.

Kris exported the data, whistling under his breath. “We cut servo temps by almost ten percent compared to last time. That’s a big jump.”

I offered a small grin. “Now we just refine it. Maybe incorporate a feedback loop to slow the pump once we hit target temperature.”

The tension in my chest loosened as we delved into the puzzle of optimizing the design. If only relationships and faculty politics were as straightforward as boundary-layer equations. As we backed up our files, I realized that, ironically, engineering gave me relief from the emotional storm swirling under the surface.

Packing up, we stepped outside into the midday sun. Kris squinted,

scanning for the nearest ice-cream vendor. “Wanna grab a cold drink? Feels like I lost a liter of sweat in there.”

I nodded, ignoring the flutter in my stomach. My phone lay silent in my pocket, but my head buzzed with unspoken questions: Would Dr. Chatterjee call me? Should I see her again soon? And how would I face Batra sir if any suspicion hardened into proof?

Kris grabbed his cycle, and we pedaled across the campus, weaving through a group of first-years lugging gigantic Graphics Lab sheets. My heart still hammered, but at least we had a small triumph—the swirl-cooling design worked. We were building something that might truly set us apart.

Yet each revolution of my bike pedals reminded me: we were also building a secret with explosive potential. One slip, one rumor confirmed, and everything could crash down. For now, I pushed that dread to the back of my mind, determined to savor our minor engineering victory. Because if a day came when Batra sir demanded answers we couldn’t give, or if Dr. Chatterjee decided she couldn’t handle the risk, I’d need these moments—bits of success, bits of hope—to keep going.

A fateful encounter

7

Arjun stepped into the Fluid Mechanics (FM) Lab just before lunchtime, pulse already thudding in his ears. The sterile hum of lab equipment couldn't hide his excitement or the quick flicker of nerves dancing in his stomach. Dr. Meera Chatterjee had texted him the night before, asking him to meet privately to discuss an urgent revision of their swirl-cooling calculations. Even as a third-year BTech student, he knew that nothing about this was "normal."

She stood near a row of experimental rigs, dressed more casually than usual—a simple salwar suit, hair pinned up. The flicker in her eyes the moment she spotted him said everything. Arjun set down his notes, trying not to look too rattled. The lab was quiet, with most students out for lunch or finishing assignments elsewhere. They had the space practically to themselves.

She led him to a far corner where a half-disassembled flow channel lay. "We need to re-check the sensor calibration," she said, her tone businesslike. But the way her fingers brushed his arm told a different story. He swallowed hard, heart pounding. They both knew this was too risky—far too risky—but the rush of seeing each other in a secluded setting overrode caution for a moment.

She moved closer, the warmth of her body dissolving Arjun's last attempt at restraint. Before either could think, their lips met in a hush of mingled breath. It started gentle, but soon, all the pent-up tension between them flared. Arjun felt her grip tighten on his shoulders as they sought comfort in a stolen moment of heat. The faint smell of machine oil and the whirl of a far-off fan merged with the rapid thrum of his pulse.

Lost in that intensity, neither heard the cautious footsteps approaching. When the lab assistant's startled gasp finally

registered, Arjun and Meera broke apart, eyes wide with horror. The man stood there, mouth agape, confusion and shock evident on his face. Arjun's heart slammed against his ribs as reality crashed in. They had been caught. Badly.

“Ma’am... Arjun...?” the assistant stammered. Then, as though the full meaning dawned on him, he turned on his heel and hurried out, presumably to alert someone higher-up. Meera's expression paled, and Arjun's stomach dropped. In that instant, they both knew: there would be no hiding this.

The storm breaks

8

Word spread through the Mechanical Engineering department with lightning speed. By late afternoon, nearly everyone was whispering about “Professor Chatterjee and that third-year BTech student.” Rumors ranged from mild speculations—“Maybe they were just hugging?”—to scandalous exaggerations. The lab assistant’s account, fueled by secondhand retellings, grew more damning each time it was repeated.

Arjun spent the rest of the day in an escalating state of panic. Kris confronted him in the hostel corridor, eyes blazing. “Dude, did something actually happen with you and Dr. Chatterjee in the FM Lab? Everyone’s talking! I tried to defend you, but—” He paused, searching Arjun’s face. “Bro, please tell me they’re lying.”

Arjun struggled to speak. He’d never seen Kris look so betrayed. “I—I can’t...” He wanted to deny it, but the guilt plastered across his face was answer enough.

Kris threw his hands up, voice low but trembling with anger. “Are you insane? First, you hide it from me, and then you get caught in the lab? Arjun, you’ve put your entire future on the line!”

Before Arjun could respond, his phone buzzed with a message from the departmental office: a summons for a “disciplinary discussion” the next morning. Kris glanced at the screen and blew out a ragged breath, shaking his head. “This is serious, man. Batra sir’s on a warpath.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Chatterjee found her own office door locked from the outside—an administrative move she recognized instantly as a disciplinary measure. The tension in her gut twisted into dread. She knew her status as a visiting faculty made her position precarious.

One slip was enough to end her career at IIT Kanpur.

That evening, Arjun received a curt email from the Dean's office: a formal notice of possible misconduct. Sleep was out of the question. He paced his hostel room, replaying every second of that ill-fated moment in the lab— how they'd let their emotions overrule common sense, how it felt so right until the second it all collapsed.

He couldn't bear to eat; Kris wouldn't even look at him, and no one else in his wing dared to ask questions. Outside, the summer night droned with cicadas, but Arjun heard only the roar of his own fear. Tomorrow, he would face the consequences—and he had no idea how to stop the tidal wave headed his way.

Judgement day

9

The next morning dawned grim. Arjun stepped into the administrative block, stomach churning as though he'd swallowed broken glass. The hallway to the disciplinary committee room felt impossibly long. Outside the door stood a few curious onlookers—students and junior faculty who'd heard the rumors. Arjun kept his head down.

Inside, a panel of stern faces waited. Professor Batra sat to one side, jaw clenched. The Dean of Students, a middle-aged professor with a reputation for zero-tolerance policies, presided. On another side of the table, Dr. Chatterjee sat, posture taut but composed. Arjun's heart squeezed at the sight of her—he could see the fear behind her steady gaze.

The Dean cleared his throat. "We're here to address allegations of misconduct involving a visiting faculty member and a third-year student. Let's keep this orderly."

One by one, the committee members took turns dissecting the lab assistant's statement, pulling up campus guidelines about professionalism and "potential exploitation." Arjun tried to explain that it was consensual—nobody exploited anyone—but each time he spoke, the weight of academic decorum slammed back.

When Dr. Chatterjee spoke, her voice trembled slightly. She confirmed that there was "an emotional involvement," her gaze flicking to Arjun only once. But she maintained it was fully mutual: "Arjun is an adult. I never coerced or pressured him. We both... it was a lapse in judgment."

Professor Batra said nothing, but his silence felt damning. Arjun remembered the rumors about them once being involved; he

wondered if personal bitterness fueled Batra's unreadable stare.

After hours of discussion, the verdict came swiftly. For Dr. Chatterjee, whose visiting faculty contract was already tenuous, immediate termination was recommended. She squeezed her eyes shut momentarily, shoulders sagging under that blow.

As for Arjun, the Dean pronounced, "Due to the severity of breaching the institute's code of conduct, a disciplinary probation of one year is in order. You'll lose registration privileges for the next semester. Further violations could lead to expulsion." Arjun felt the ground tilt beneath him. His academic life—derailed.

Kris stood at the back, arms folded, anger and disappointment etched into his features. Arjun couldn't meet his gaze. Everything he and Dr. Chatterjee had risked —swirl-cooling project, budding emotions—lay in ruins, scattered by the committee's final hammer of judgment. And yet, in the midst of the heartbreak, Arjun noticed only the quiet devastation on her face. That hurt most of all.

Aftermath and silence

10

The sun hung low over campus by the time Arjun stumbled out of the administrative block. The disciplinary hearing was over, and with it, his illusions of normalcy. Kris waited near the steps, arms crossed. Arjun tried to speak, but the words choked in his throat.

Kris's voice came out tight. "You really hid all this from me? Your best friend? And now... you've lost a year of your BTech. What were you thinking?"

Arjun let out a shaky breath. "I'm sorry. I couldn't explain it—didn't even understand it myself. It just... happened."

Kris raked a hand through his hair, expression conflicted. "You know me, man. I don't judge you for feeling something for her. But sneaking around on campus? In the FM lab?" His voice cracked. "Look where it got you. Where it got her."

Dr. Chatterjee's fate hung like a storm cloud. She'd left the building quietly after the verdict, face pale, eyes red-rimmed. Arjun knew she'd be packing up her desk tomorrow, forced out with barely a reference letter to her name. He wanted to chase after her, apologize, do something—but how could he fix this?

They walked in strained silence through the campus. Students whispered and stared, word of the hearing traveling faster than even Kris had anticipated. Arjun ignored the stares, heart too numb to care. Finally, he and Kris stopped at the Mech Workshop, ironically the place where their swirl-cooling dreams once took shape.

Kris exhaled. "A disciplinary probation for a year. You'll have to skip a semester, retake courses... the swirl-cooling project is

probably out. I—I can't believe it came to this."

Arjun blinked back a sudden rush of tears, shame burning his cheeks. "I know," he managed. "I'm so sorry."

For a moment, Kris said nothing, then placed a hand on Arjun's shoulder. "Look, you messed up big time, but I'm still your friend. We'll figure out some way forward—once the dust settles." His tone held both empathy and disappointment.

That evening, Arjun wandered near the workshop one last time, half-hoping Dr. Chatterjee would appear for a quiet goodbye. She didn't. Instead, the hush of the empty lab mocked him, a stark reminder of what he'd lost. The swirl-cooling prototype stood disassembled in the corner—like a metaphor for his life, now fragmented by secrets, consequences, and regrets he couldn't undo.

The pieces that remain

EPILOGUE

A year later, the IIT Kanpur campus looked the same— the sprawling lawns, the unmistakable red-brick buildings, the loud peacocks shrieking in the distance—but for Arjun, everything felt different. He had returned after his disciplinary probation, but the world had not stood still while he was gone. His batchmates had moved on, graduated, some already working in MNCs, some flying out for MS and PhDs. He was now a year behind, walking among a different set of third-years who didn't know him, didn't whisper about his past. For them, he was just another student. For the rest, he was the guy who had been caught.

It had taken months for the whispers to die down. For the first few months, every glance, every half-smile, every hushed conversation felt like it was about him. But time, as always, had moved forward. The campus found new scandals, new stories. And Arjun? He had learned to live with the silence.

He walked toward the Mechanical Workshop, the one place that still felt like home. A fresh batch of students were working on their BAJA buggy, arguing over suspension design. He spotted a familiar face—Kris, now a final-year student, standing by a lathe machine, explaining something to a junior.

Kris turned, met his eyes, and for a brief second, the weight of the past year hung between them. Then Kris smiled, a little hesitant but genuine. "Look who's back," he said, wiping grease off his hands.

Arjun smirked. "The prodigal mechie."

They stood in silence for a moment before Kris nudged him lightly. "You okay?"

Arjun exhaled. "I am now."

Kris nodded, then jerked his chin toward a nearby workstation. "By the way, guess what survived?"

Arjun followed his gaze—and there, tucked in a corner, sat their swirl-cooled robotic arm. Dismantled, dusty, but unmistakably theirs.

“I thought they scrapped it,” Arjun murmured, stepping forward, running his fingers over the familiar metal.

“They almost did. But I pulled some strings, convinced them to let me and the juniors keep it as a research project,” Kris admitted. He hesitated before adding, “I didn’t want all of it to disappear.”

Arjun swallowed hard. Of all the things he thought he’d lost, this—this piece of engineering, of ambition, of them— still remained.

“You wanna rebuild it?” Kris asked, tilting his head.

Arjun thought of everything that had happened. The risk, the heartbreak, the year lost, but not wasted. He wasn’t the same person who had walked into Dr. Meera Chatterjee’s office that evening. He was older, not just by months but by experience, by regret, by resilience.

He placed a hand on the robotic arm. “Yeah,” he said softly. “Let’s rebuild it.”

Kris grinned. “Cool. But this time, let’s try not to flood the workshop.”

Arjun chuckled, the first genuine laugh in months. The past couldn’t be undone, but the future? That was still his to build.

Grit and uncertainty refined Arjun’s resolve, allowing victory. Bold hopes uplifted them, achieving newfound ingenuity. And so, in the quiet hum of the workshop, among the whir of machines and the scent of metal and oil, they began again.